

The TIMES

of Northport & East Northport

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Volume 7, No. 42

February 3, 2011

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Photo by Patricia Proven; cartoons by Nikki Lee, reprinted with permission

Northport author Jackie Humans, right, with her daughter and the illustrator, Nikki, 24, who graduated in 2008 from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.



Book empowers kids to 'Zap a Bully'

Northport author-illustrator duo offers snappy comebacks and ways parents can help

BY PATRICIA PROVEN
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The author of "15 Ways to Zap a Bully" (Legwork Team Publishing, 2010) has no formula for dealing with verbal and emotional barbs. She knows no magic words to make bullies vanish. She doesn't even promise that every technique in the 23-page book will work for every child.

What Jackie Humans of Northport does offer are ideas that empower children to solve their own problems whether or not an adult comes to their aid.

Humans, a parent who has a background in social marketing and experience as an anti-bullying presenter in Long Island schools, says kids who learn to stand up for themselves from an early age gain the confidence needed to discourage intimidation and harassment their whole lives long.

"Bullies don't magically disappear," said Humans, "they grow up and reappear in the workplace."

Humans also acknowledges this reality: some kids won't tell an adult they're being

bullied, especially if it might be perceived they're "babies" or are "tattling."

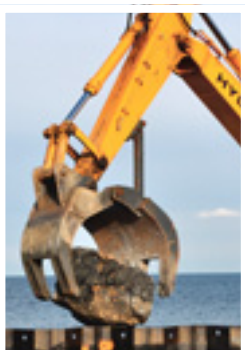
South Huntington parent Mary Beth Steenson Kraese recalls feeling like that as a child. "The biggest thing in the world was I was afraid to tell my parents that other children were calling me names. It was embarrassing, I guess."

Humans said, "Not that they should feel that way. Sometimes a problem is bigger than you and then, by all means, get help." But to deny children the know-how to help themselves is "not only wrong, it's cruel."

"15 Ways" sets out to give bullied kids options for responding verbally that range from the subtle to serious to silly, depending on their personality and the situation.

A few of the tips were inspired by the 1997 book entitled, "What to Do ... When Kids Are Mean to Your Child" by Elin McCoy. Most of the other ideas were conceived by Humans' daughter and illustrator, Nikki Lee, 24, who claims she was bullied physically and verbally by classmates in a Northport private school

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Seawall back up

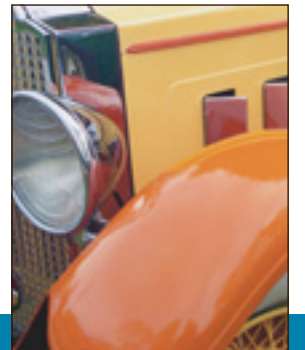
Repair is complete but there's a stumbling block to restoring the beach
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and Northport High School.

What's key to remember, Humans and Nikki say, is that bullies expect and want targets to act hurt, angry or upset by their actions. Many of their tips suggest ways of throwing the bully off guard. Tip 11 recommends looking the bully in the eyes and confidently naming their game: "You think you're cool but you're just a *bully*."

Though the book also puts a new spin on the age-old advice of ignoring a bully by thinking about something else (Tips 2 to 4), that technique is often the least popular among children. "It's really hard," Humans said. "And it's too passive. Most kids want a snappy comeback." Ignoring bullies can also prompt them to redouble their efforts for a reaction. A victim who tries this technique should know "this could get worse before it gets better," she said.

Still for some children, like Kraese's 12-year-old son, Mason, who was recently diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, the most helpful advice is "go tell." Kraese explained, "It's kind of hard for [some] special-needs children to come up with the words in the first place."

That's why Tip 15: Put it in Writing came in handy for Mason, a seventh-grader who documents what a bully does, with the date and a picture of what happened. "It helps me become more self-confident so it will never happen again once I tell someone," he said, adding that telling his parents and a teacher about kids making fun of him and threatening him on the school bus led to their suspension.

Inspired by life

Children with disabilities are often targets for abuse, Humans said, and her daughter, too, has Asperger syndrome. Her behavioral "quirks," as Nikki calls them, were not diagnosed in her early youth but made her stand out



from the crowd in a way that wasn't always welcome. However, being razor-tongued herself helped her ultimately outsmart the bullies. "Her strength has always been her verbal skills," Humans said.

By the time Nikki entered high school, she had a circle of friends who gave her the feeling that someone had her back. "I stopped caring what other people thought about me," she said. Such assurance helped her defend herself against anyone who might berate her.

At age 15, when the leader of a clique at school antagonized her with, "What are you looking at?" Nikki responded in a silly voice, "You. I'm lookin' at you, 'cause you're so purrrty!" which elicited roars of laughter from the class and dumbfounded the bully.

Humans recalls with pride the way her daughter responded to a 40-something acquaintance who was in her home and began to bait Nikki, then 16. "You have autism: what's that?" Humans recalls him saying. "What, isn't that when you don't care about other people?"

Without missing a beat, Nikki said, "It's not that I don't care about other people. I don't care what they think of me."

And when she was a senior in high school, Nikki outsmarted some younger boys who would hurl coins and threaten to rape her. She asked a principal to stand out of sight in a corner of the hall where it was happening and, when the boys started up again, Nikki pointed them out and shouted, "They're the ones!"

The principal offered to suspend the boys — what they were saying was sexual harassment — but Nikki said she felt the 13-year-olds didn't realize the gravity of their words and she preferred that they be made to feel sorry for what they had done. The next time she saw the boys, they were apologetic, she recalls, with them having realized she could have had them expelled.

Confidence is crucial

Beyond trying the techniques in the book, children can focus on developing their confidence. It is damaging for anyone who is bullied to get in the habit of thinking, "There must be something wrong with me that I am being treated this way," Humans said. "Muggers, rapists — they literally interview you for the job," she added, noting that a person's reaction to verbal attacks is a clue to how easily he or she might be dominated physically. And it's not always the words that tell. "Body language is 90 percent of the message," she said.

Humans advises parents to engage children in self-defense and acting classes, and provide positive reinforcement with statements like, "You made really good eye contact." For people with very shy kids, she suggests role-playing, where the parent is the target and the child is the bully. It does not generally interest children to play it the other way around, she said.

"Let parents have a taste of what they have to go through." Kids can then model appropriate reactions by coaching parents in what they did "wrong."

When it's physical

Humans, who volunteered with Child Abuse Prevention Services in Roslyn from 2004 to 2009, emphasizes that most of the strategies she writes are meant for young children and do not apply to situations that become physical. She advises her child to defend herself if her physical

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well-being is seriously threatened. Also, report every physical incident to an adult, Humans said; even accidents can lead to

very serious injuries.

But Nikki said when it comes to being shoved or punched in the arm, "I do not suggest getting into a physical altercation with a bully." Adults, as well-meaning as they may be, do not like to pick apart a fight and take sides. Instead, Nikki recommends being vocal and getting yourself "a bunch of witnesses" before a confrontation escalates. She personally finds satisfaction in thinking that if someone resorts to physical intimidation, it's because they've run out of other ways to rile you: "You've kind of won already."

Teen Bullying — 'Are You Gay?'

Humans said her next book deals with confrontations older children face, including sexual harassment, peer pressure and cyberbullying. Harassment and rumors spread through social networking tools like Facebook can be particularly disparaging, Nikki said, because the kids are attached at the hip to technology and "It's never-ending; it feels unbearable to them." Nikki's approach to cyberbullies: "Consider them trolls. They just want attention. They like to see people fighting back and forth. Think: What are they trying to get out of me here?"

Kraese, a PTA vice president who runs a social media business, looks forward to the sequel: "Since social media is playing a big part in [people's lives], kids have to be more aware of what they say and what they do on the Internet."

Cyberbullying seminar

On Tuesday, March 15, the town is holding a free cyberbullying seminar in the Town Hall board room from 7 to 9 pm. The seminar, geared toward middle school and high school-aged children, features presentations from Project Excel Director Valerie Drakos and Suffolk County Police Department Computer Crimes Detective Rory Forestal. Learn ...

- Different forms, methods and consequences of cyberbullying
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Legals

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Notice of formation of Prestige Electrical Services LLC. Articles of Organization filed with the Secretary of State of New York

SSNY on 11/18/2010. Office located in Suffolk, SSNY has been designated for service of process. SSNY shall mail copy of any process served against the LLC to : 30 Wicks Road, East Northport, NY 11731. Purpose: Any lawful purpose.

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